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Title: Strategies of difference: disrupting the psyches of opposition for a politics of the future

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Strategies of difference: disrupting the psyches of opposition for a politics of the future

James Batcho¹

How are we to discuss the impossibility of political engagement in our age of abundance, this age in which discussion is too possible and far too easy? By easy, I don't only mean accessible. It's also that the ubiquity of technological devices *eases* us into habits: simplicity, decisiveness, dismissal, confirmation. We are easily affirmed and we can easily oppose. This ease of possibility makes political discussion impossible. Technology eases habit, and our habit is to be comfortable in our particular streams of knowing.

Intellectual discussions of "the political," and what is to be done as political beings, tend to work through structures. We critique historical shifts, analyze tendencies and movements, and target unassailable forces that situate our possibility. All the while, we who discuss find ourselves outside a living possibility. With the massive acceleration of technological possibility, we're neglecting the other political question: what are *we* doing, not in our analysis but in our thinking, acting and living? What are our everyday strategies of political thought and action? What habits are we nurturing through these detached comments, posts and screened receptions, our participation in this field of illusive immediacy?

It's common for us – by "us" I mean not any opposition to "them," but we with the economic advantage of typing on devices of possibility – to couch the situation within some pre-conceived binary that opposes two sides. An obligatory thesis is launched:

"There are two kinds of people: [Group A] and

[Group B]."

This builds a contradiction of *one* behavior or interest against *the* other. It provides a way of discursively containing the maddening chaos of beliefs for the purposes of commentary. In the universe of YouTube and Substack, such strategies present the appearance of authority, emotion and logic, conforming to all three aspects of Aristotle's rhetoric. Further, they reveal our training in rhetorical dialectics – the oppositions and contradictions that are embedded in the history of thought. This history invades all thought by discipline.

In the mediatized landscape of debate, the news media has been our best teacher in the continuance of this tradition. News institutions, operating under the ideology of objectivity, practice a precise science of persuasion by opposing two legitimate, namable parties:

"Here is [Group A Expert] and [Group B Expert]; listen and vote."

We know the teams by their terms: Democrat vs Republican, Left vs Right, Blue vs Red, Science vs Faith, Antifa vs Alt-right, etc. We place human beings into these containers and seal them tight, conveniently ignoring that individuals live in multiple worlds and defy categories. These variances that defy are only deemed real when they can be mediated for the benefit of capital, for the *ease* of containment. This manifests in techno-capitalism's control over virtue. There is information and anything outside of this is rendered as "misinformation." This claim forgets, for the ease of maintaining a profitable product, that it's *all*

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information. All of it becomes data to be mined by a techno-feudal lord who owns the property upon which expression is contained, and increasingly, policed. We who make content habituate our learning, becoming corporate media's mimetic priests.

The point here is not to romanticize some information-free past, nor to analyze how we got here; rather it is to diagnose our current state and the rhetorical divisiveness that has been elevated to a religious battle. Any "side" is necessarily righteous and each employs the same rhetorics under opposing virtues. It's difficult to compose political dialogue outside of this fixed architecture due to the exquisite lie of immediacy offered by technology. In the media-trained perfection of practice, differences are rendered as opaque:

"Don't overthink it. It's really quite simple."

This is the dogma we find at the apex of this centuries-long project of liberalism. This liberal-*ism* is not the left, nor even "Democrats." Republicans, centrists, experts, scientists, corporate CEOs – all fall under liberal practices and laws.

Structurally, liberalism in its post-Enlightenment sense is defined as the progress of science against the stranglehold of the old Church. Individually, it's defined as the power and agency of the subject in relation to the State. We feel its failure in its reversal, this point when "liberals" are neither individuals nor antagonizers. They, that is "we," are the State to the degree that the State is "liberal." We are the Church in how liberalism has, through sublation, emerged from divine negation into an atheist rule of today's liberal order, which conditions the binaries of permissible discourse. This is why "neoliberalism" can no longer only be thought at the structural level of business power over the State. We must consider how, over several decades, it

has infected the bloodstream, the psyche, of the thinker. Liberalism has fostered a spirit in which "business" is a virtue, but one in alliance with the State. This climate is increasingly techno-feudal, since thought and expression tills the land of tech corporations for the wealth of the landowner.

How we think politics in such a manner, *on* such a *manor*, reveals a manufactured double opposition. The first is the discursive structure of A versus B as opposition, contradiction and negation. The second is made of the first. It functions to oppose whatever expression lies outside of the first opposition. We may think of this "outside" as the nameless expressions that must become named, identified and thrown back into one of the two sides of the first opposition. Either you play the game of the first opposition, or your idea threatens its power and becomes corralled into it. If you are *other than* the opposition in today's liberalism, you become *easily* contained as "illiberal" and rendered as opposite. Radicalism becomes eased into the opposition. The problem of this age of liberalism is its tendency to mete out easy justice – that is, the adjudication of behavior in accordance with a side: good or evil. The ultimate aim is a fantasy version of Hegel's ideal State, a universal ethics that conforms to the *Logos* of the good, the righteous, the absolute.

The State we are tending toward is one in which individual thought is aligned to this corporatized version of liberalism, harmoniously doling out the terms of good and evil. It's a State in which overt control is no longer necessary, only agreeable compliance. Deleuze was right in shifting the historical critique from disciplinary control to the openness of communication.² The pandemic has accelerated this openness while returning and habituating new disciplines of confinement. Both open and confined, our political participation rests on the

²Gilles Deleuze, "Control and Becoming," in *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 169-176.

neo-techno-feudal manor (the app, the host, the company, etc.). It's a place where we enjoy the illusion of empowerment as we harvest the data that legitimizes the manor, binding "politics" to a future of division.

If we are to overcome this, we cannot simply condemn the forces of evil over our public forums and call it a day. Evil exists only so long as we grant it power as a force opposed to the Good. The imperative must instead be to question our priestly strategies that mirror corporate media – codifying the evil category to mandate the good. We must, rather, think the future through an ethics of *difference* to affirm outside of binary oppositions. The exertion of oppositional power will neither heal the binary nor bring about the eternal Good State. A universal ethics of liberalism would require a religious conversion to an atheism without a transcendent power, without eternity. This, the current strategy, is too much to ask. We can no longer afford to react and oppose; we must instead express and affirm what is *other*. We must find the courage to dislodge the easy habit of copying authority to reach easy conclusions. We need something plural, something multiple; we need to develop lines of creative expression that unsettle us from our conclusions. If we do not, that which we have identified and legitimized as "*they*" will. They have already begun, by stealing the activist tactics the left once employed, twisting it into a reactionary politics of hate, balancing the Good/Evil binary.³

In my book *Living in an Age of Survival*, I chronicled a major shift from 2016–2021, when we actively nurtured such divisiveness at the expense of difference. From Trump through Covid, liberalism, and all who live in its technological glory, mastered the necessities of op-

position against chaos. We trained ourselves for screened distances and sensory depravation and perfected a politics of dismissal and approval. The conclusion I came to, which was anything but easy, was that the architecture of control and conformity comes through a religious drive to determine the righteousness of one's category – the *name*, which is not God. Technologies of openness brought us to such closures and demands. We forgot that good/evil is always a question of power and that we conform to power so long as it establishes "[Good]" against "[Evil]" by name. As centralized power continually flips in a dialectical exchange from Good to Evil and back again, we find ourselves distending power through our participation in this dialectic. But this power is not two, it is One. Through our mimetic participation, what survives and continues is the power of elite wealth – an increasingly concentrated alliance of State, media and science.

We fail to understand that which we cannot see. The virus should have been an opening to think what cannot be seen and what can barely be identified – this threat that lives and spreads inside and between bodies. It's time to turn this from division – a fight *against* the other body, the other mind, as a threat – into a strategy of creative possibility. This is our time to *become viral*, to affirm difference, to integrate an ethics of radicalism and otherness into the fold of creative, collective activity. We need to "draw forth the courage to risk the spread of something different. ...to elevate *chance* as an active force against the incessant need to contain and control."⁴

It's not enough to critique institutional powers and the lords of the manor. It's up to us to express in nonconformist ways, to encourage strategies of difference, and to do so within

³This is drawn from Deleuze's "paralogism of *ressentiment*," itself drawn from his readings of Nietzsche. An accusation opposes the evil of the other to the good of oneself; in this, a "real relation" of "difference" becomes neutralized and "replaced by a moral opposition." See Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

⁴James Batcho, *Living in an Age of Survival* (Ogden, UT: Glass Spider Publishing, 2022).

the worlds and channels that are available to us. Creativity is vital to this future. Creativity is necessarily dangerous and disruptive. The problem of liberalism is not its impending death,⁵ but the manner in which it survives. We need to encourage a creativity that surpasses the instinct toward survival against death and certainty, one which moves instead along lines that affirm life and living.

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⁵See Daniel H. Cole and Aurelian Craiutu, "The many deaths of Liberalism," *Aeon*, June 28, 2018, <https://aeon.co/essays/reports-of-the-demise-of-liberalism-are-greatly-exaggerated>.